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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TIRANA 000999

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [NATO](#) [AL](#)

SUBJECT: ALBANIA COURTS THE NATO ALLIES WITH SUCCESS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN L. WITHERS II, REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Senior Albanian officials voice confidence that their accelerated outreach to NATO capitals in recent months has rallied significant support to Albania's NATO candidacy. Although aware no formal decisions have been made and that they are likely to be invited in conjunction with Croatia and Macedonia, the Albanians are gratified that France, Germany, Spain, and Canada, previously regarded as fence sitters, have sent strong signals of support. The Albanians' principal concerns are now the United Kingdom, which remains determinedly noncommittal, and Greece, whose ongoing squabbles with Macedonia, GOA officials fear, may do collateral harm to Albanian hopes. They are also concerned at the perceived slowing of the pace of reform in Macedonia itself. The GOA's next round of lobbying, which will include inviting representatives of all the NATO allies to Tirana, will focus specifically on these remaining problems. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) In the lead-up to the Bucharest summit, Albanian officials have blanketed Allied capitals to press the case for a NATO invitation in April. To date, President Topi, Parliament Speaker Topalli, Prime Minister Berisha, Foreign Minister Basha, Defense Minister Mediu, and various parliamentarians have crisscrossed Europe and North America, lobbied on the margins of international conferences from Brussels to Lisbon, and planned numerous public events and a media blitz to underscore Albania's determined progress toward NATO's performance-based standards. Albania's potential contributions to the Alliance -- shown in its military presence in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Bosnia; its statesman-like foreign policy stances in Kosovo and international organizations like the IAEA and OIC; and its crucial role in regional stability in the Balkans -- were central themes of Berisha's speeches at UNGA and the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Reykjavik. In addition, the GOA has extended invitations to key NATO players, including every Allied ambassador to NATO, to visit Tirana to assess Albania's progress for themselves.

13. (C) GOA officials are gratified at responses to their efforts so far. They detect a clear trend among the Europeans toward inviting all three Balkan aspirants (Croatia, Albania, and Macedonia) at Bucharest, and a growing consensus that Albania is doing its part to meet NATO requirements -- although they are in no doubt that much more needs to be done in areas such as judicial and electoral reform and human trafficking. In recent conversations with the Ambassador, Foreign Minister Basha provided an informal "scorecard" on the current situation as he sees it:

-- Among the countries that have consistently expressed support, Basha counts the United States, Turkey, Italy, and the Vilnius-10;

-- Among the countries that have now moved from fence sitters to supporters, he includes France, Germany, Spain, Portugal, Iceland, and Canada;

-- Among those that are "cautiously positive" toward Albania are Belgium, Denmark, Norway (although Basha believes that plans to open an embassy in Oslo in 2008 will help move the Norwegians), and the Netherlands (here Basha is confident that his long-time associations with the Dutch -- he was educated at the university of Utrecht and speaks fluent Dutch -- will help bring them around).

14. (C) Asked about remaining problem areas, Basha listed three:

-- He is puzzled, he said, that the United Kingdom remains determinedly noncommittal in view of what the British see as insufficient progress toward judicial reform. Basha is confident, however, that pending actions in Parliament in that sphere will mollify those concerns.

-- Basha is also concerned about Greece. While Tirana's current relations with Athens are good -- he declared that Greek FM Bakoyannis will visit in coming weeks -- he worries that the bilateral disputes between Greece and Macedonia are unabating and seemingly intractable. In the "expansion by three" scenario now gaining currency among the Allies, Albania fears collateral damage to its own candidacy if Skopje-Athens relations do not improve. The GOA has urged cooperation between its two neighbors, but so far to little effect.

-- Finally, Basha confessed himself anxious about growing perceptions that progress toward reform in Macedonia itself has slowed. He called it "cold comfort" when certain Allies declared that Albania has surpassed Macedonia in its NATO preparedness. "We are in this together," he commented.

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15. (C) COMMENT: The Albanians are pleased -- truth to tell, relieved -- at the success of their lobbying efforts to date. At minimum, they believe they have buried that old saw that Albania's NATO aspirations have no support in European capitals. Yet, despite the positive movement so far, the GOA is gripped with a sense of urgency. Officials here are keenly aware that, despite the growing expressions of support, no NATO member has yet made a formal decision on expansion. Should momentum on reform wane, an unanticipated international event (read: Kosovo) occur, or domestic squabbling within the Albanian body politic re-emerge, those upbeat assessments might be reversed. They thus know the importance of sustaining, even accelerating, their outreach plans. Their focus must now include identified problem cases. They believe they have the means of overcoming the doubts of the British and other skeptics. They will, however, certainly seek intensified Allied assistance in interceding with Greece and Macedonia. END COMMENT.
WITHERS